

**“Key Messages: Your Keys To Success”**  
**2007 EPA Community Involvement Conference**  
**J. Mike Rogers and Briana Bill, presenters**  
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- What are key messages?
  - Key messages are the most important things to say on a specific subject to audiences. That includes internal audiences – those who may be familiar with only their own area of expertise, but need a better “big picture.”
  - They are clear, concise, bite-sized chunks of information that *may* stand alone, but more likely are used to develop other materials, such as desk statements, speeches, fact sheets, Q&As and other documents.
  - They’re easy to say and – more important – easy for the audience to understand and remember. Say too much and you may lose your audience.
  - They’re specific, and written in the active voice
  - They are memorable and persuasive – the audience should remember the key message and *in certain instances* be moved to action.
  - Key messages are *not* “spin” and they are *not* “dumbing-down.” They boost our overall communication effort by providing clarity, focus and precision. By being brief and simple, they can be understood by people who don’t have a scientific or technical background – and that’s usually our audience.
  - Key messages are not our *only* messages, merely the most important.
- Why are they important?
  - Key messages help focus the target audience’s attention.
  - They help us stay organized and in control.
  - They keep everybody on the same page.
  - Others can use key messages to fill in when primary subject-matter experts are unavailable. Maintains continuity.
  - They help target audiences better understand our position, and improved understanding usually translates to improved support.
  - They support goals in communication plans, either formal or informal. We don’t develop key messages just to say something. They have a clear purpose.
- How are key messages developed and tested?
  - Sometimes, key messages are provided to us by Headquarters – in those cases, we take the guidance and apply necessary elaboration, tweaking where necessary.
  - When we prepare our own key messages, we begin by identifying all the points we want to get across to the audience, then we focus on the most important points.
  - In developing key messages, we need to identify the most important things we need to say, but we also need to identify what each unique target audience is concerned about. What do they want to hear from EPA?
  - Refine the messages, remove any scientific language or departmental jargon, make them brief. Would the message fit on a T-shirt or a bumper sticker? If not, it’s too complicated – shorten or simplify it.

- Generally, have no more than three key messages.
  - Begin with a premise statement – or a “topic sentence” as you learned way back in English 101. *This is the key message.*
    - Make sure the key message is in the active voice – no passive!
    - It should be positive – what you *can* do, not what you *can't* do.
  - Develop a few supporting points, statistics or quotes to back up the message. Your English teacher probably called this “elaboration.”
  - Come up with some good examples that bring the key message to life – the more visual, the better. Tell a story that helps the audience empathize.
  - Vince Covello’s risk communication training – 27/9/3 template
    - 27 words (for all three, average of nine words each message)
    - 9 seconds
    - 3 messages
- To test the messages, try them out on someone unfamiliar with the topic – someone from another division, a family member, a teenager. If that person has difficulty understanding, refine the message until it can be understood.

#### **Different audiences, same message:**

- Who is your audience?
  - Rarely is it “the general public.” Key messages are generally developed for specific target audiences: environmental groups, farmers, those living near a Superfund site.
- What do they need to know, and what do you want them to do?
  - This could take some research. You may need to talk with opinion leaders of the target audience to learn something about them.
- How do you adapt the message for each different audience?
  - If we’re addressing an environmental group, the focus could be health. For an industry group, economics.
- Repetition, repetition, repetition. Think of the old adage about real estate.

#### **Staying on message:**

- Positive tone – turning negative into positive.
  - If there’s a question or statement that attempts to drag the discussion to a different topic, one response is, “You’re right, that’s important. But I believe it’s more important to remember <insert key message>.”
  - Political candidates (of both parties) are the best at this. Study how they do it.
  - The best practitioners don’t merely repeat the same points over and over. They repeat their key messages, but they do it in a slightly different way every time.

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